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The 'Bulgarian Connection' Is Still on Trial

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WHEN the Papal shooting trial resumes in Rome this week after a summer recess, the court will start at last to hear independent testimony on the "Bulgarian connection." So far, it has heard mostly from the gunman, Mehmet Ali Agca, who has done his bewildering best to becloud the proceeding, in which four fellow Turks and three Bulgarians are charged with conspiracy to assassinate Pope John Paul II. Now 120 witnesses for the state and scores more for the defense will help determine the veracity of Mr. Agca's pre-trial confession, the basis of the charges.

That confession appears to have a life of its own. Mr. Agca, who was convicted of the 1981 attack on the Pope in St. Peter's Square, had told the authorities that the Soviet Union, Bulgaria and a Turkish right-wing group, the Gray Wolves, organized the plot. But in court, he has seemed bent on discrediting his confession by zigging and zagging over previous statements, spicing his testimony with apocalyptic pronouncements ("I am Jesus Christ! I am omnipotent, and I announce the end of the world!"). Nonetheless, the state is prepared to present circumstantial evidence supporting the Agca confession, including details of his alleged meetings with the Bulgarians, their offer of money and a getaway truck.

Mr. Agca has never defected from his basic contention of Bulgarian involvement, and whatever the self-inflicted damage to his credibility, the defense has yet to show how he could have known as much as he proved to know about the Bulgarians now on trial unless he worked with or for them. That hasn't discouraged alternative theories, all based on the assumption that Mr. Agca was coached under one or another of the following circumstances:

- Italian or American secret services hired right-wing Turkish gunmen to kill the Pope, then blame it on the Russians. This theory, the first reaction of the Soviet bloc, has gained little credence elsewhere.

- Turkish gunmen were hired by crooked international financiers including Roberto Calvi, late head of the bankrupt Banco Ambrosiano, to prevent the Pope from exposing their shady dealings. Afterward, Western secret services seized the occasion to invent a Bulgarian connection, using Mr. Agca, to embarrass the Soviet Union. This theory has been advanced by Soviet bloc press and some Western journalists.

- The Gray Wolves did it on their own out of visceral Islamic hatred for Christianity, then sought to implicate the Soviet bloc, thus striking enemies in both the East and West. According to some versions, Western intelligence agencies followed up by inventing a Bulgarian connection.

The last theory is the most plausible but, like the others, has serious flaws. Barring Western intelligence involvement — and so far no evidence of it has emerged — it fails to explain Mr. Agca's detailed knowledge of the Bulgarians and their movements. Advocates of the theory would argue back that he might have either fabricated his account from news reports or gleaned information during his known visits to Bulgaria.

Some variations hold that Western intelligence agencies somehow persuaded Mr. Agca to implicate the Bulgarians and the Russians while he was imprisoned, possibly with the aid of Raffaele Cutolo, a head of the Neapolitan underworld, who was in the same prison. Mr. Cutolo once acted as intermediary for the intelligence services to negotiate the release of a politician kidnapped by the Red Brigade, and a close aide has testified that Mr. Cutolo got to Mr. Agca on behalf of those agencies. But an equally close associate has denied it, as does Mr. Cutolo. In any event, he was moved in April 1982 to solitary confinement in another prison; Mr. Agca, no longer within his reach, did not begin to confess until May and did not implicate the Bulgarians until six months later. Of course, none of this excludes the possibility that others may have talked with Mr. Agca, but so far there is no evidence of it.

If only because these scenarios are so weak, the Bulgarian connection has survived Mr. Agca's baffling efforts to smudge it over. He is thought by the Italian prosecutor, Antonio Marini, to be maneuvering to attract

help for an escape or win his release. In any case, he has become hopeless as the state's chief witness, and Dr. Marini must proceed without him.

Though nothing approaching conclusive evidence on the Bulgarians has emerged, the court has gathered much pertinent information. The case has rested on the allegation that the Bulgarian secret service controlled a Turkish arms and drugs syndicate that supposedly hired a Turkish gunman for the attack. So far, two Turkish crime bosses, Abuzer Ugurlu and Bekir Celenk — a defendant in absentia — have been mentioned in the trial and tied to the Bulgarian secret service and Gray Wolves.

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